

## **IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO PREVENT UNEXPECTED DEATHS**

Dysphagia/aspiration and constipation/bowel obstruction are two conditions that are not uncommon among individuals with intellectual disabilities. What many people don't know is that each of these conditions can lead to sudden and unexpected death.

DYSPHAGIA is the medical term for difficulty swallowing and it may lead to ASPIRATION, which is commonly called choking. People choke because food, drink or sometimes stomach contents enter the trachea (windpipe) or lungs. When this happens we often say that the food or liquid "went down the wrong pipe." When the airway becomes blocked, serious respiratory distress occurs.

CONSTIPATION occurs when bowel movements become difficult or less frequent. In cases of severe constipation a large lump of dry, hard stool may prevent or severely limit bowel movement. This is called BOWEL OBSTRUCTION.

Every year, people of all ages who are intellectually disabled die of aspiration and bowel obstruction. Too often providers think of these deaths as happening in other states, in other agencies and in other programs, but never in their own program. The truth is that people die of aspiration and bowel obstruction right here in Virginia. They die in facilities, in community programs and they die in their homes. And many of these deaths can be prevented by taking a few simple measures.

As the people responsible for helping to assure the health, safety and happiness of individuals with intellectual disabilities, we would like to share with you information about what you can do to prevent the death of the people you serve from aspiration and bowel obstruction. This document and the attached resource documents are intended to bring the issues to your attention; they are not intended to be the sole resources in your training efforts. There is a great wealth of training material on the internet that addresses dysphasia/ aspiration and bowel issues. We encourage you to take the time to review this document and then to visit the web to find out more about dysphasia/aspiration and constipation/bowel obstruction.

### What You Can Do

- ▶ When people start having trouble breathing, even if they're not choking, call 911 immediately.
- ▶ If a person has a choking episode, this may be a sign that he or she has a problem swallowing. Take action. Have the person evaluated for dysphagia.
- ▶ When people, especially those with a history of constipation, stop having their regular bowel movements or show signs that they may be having stomach pain, bloating, or distress, have them evaluated.
- ▶ Monitor the bowel movements of people who have stopped taking medications, including over the counter medications, aimed at addressing constipation.
- ▶ Monitor the bowel movements of people who are taking medications that may contribute to constipation. These medications can present a greater risk to individuals with intellectual disabilities than others. Such medications include, but are not limited to narcotics, Cogentin (benztropine), Artane (trihexyphenidyl), older antipsychotic agents such as haloperidol and chlorpromazine, and some older antidepressant medications such as Elavil (amitriptyline) and doxepin.

Thank you.